Shaheen hails Pakistan's victory against 'neighbours' after Sri Lanka ODI series sweep

RAWALPINDI: A smile lit up Shaheen Shah Afridi's face as he mentioned Pakistan Shaheens' victory against India 'A' at the Rising Stars Asia Cup.

Addressing the post-match ceremony after his side completed a series sweep against Sri Lanka on Sunday, Pakistan's One-day International captain hailed a good day for cricket in the country.

"We've now won two consecutive [ODI] series," said Shaheen, referring to the team's victory against South Africa a week earlier, after Pakistan eased to a six-wicket victory over Sri Lanka in the third and final ODI in Rawalpindi.

"Today Pakistan Shaheens also won, and more importantly they won against our neighbours … it makes you happy that all the youngsters performed," he added when asked to comment on Pakistan Shaheens' eight-wicket thrashing of India 'A' in Qatar.

"Here [in Rawalpindi] as well, everyone chipped in across the three matches, everyone played their best cricket which is why we won."

Pakistan's bowlers set up the victory for the hosts after they shot down Sri Lanka for 211 before Mohammad Rizwan's second half-century on the trot settled the chase.

"[Having in-form] senior players at the crease gives an altogether different outlook," Shaheen said. "Rizwan and Babar [Azam] have always been the backbone of the team and have always performed. Rizwan finished both matches, living up to his role as a senior player."

The second ODI had seen Babar end an 83-innings century drought across all formats and Shaheen was happy that the batting mainstay was back among the runs.

"It wasn't the first time he's made a hundred," said Shaheen. "But it's important for Pakistan cricket when your main batter gets big runs. He was working on it throughout, he's been fighting, he kept his focus and reaped the rewards."

Shaheen said Pakistan will look to keep up the momentum as they head into the tri-nation T20 series against Sri Lanka and Zimbabwe that starts from Tuesday.

"We will give our best," Shaheen said. "The team is performing well and all the players are doing well, which is good for Pakistan cricket. As a team we're ready for the challenge."

MORE THAN A SERIES WIN

Pakistan head coach Mike Hesson, meanwhile, believed the national ODI outfit was nicely growing into a strong unit.

In a post on social media platform X on Monday, Hesson pointed out a number of positives from the series sweep of Sri Lanka, suggesting the future was bright as Pakistan prepare for the 2027 World Cup.

"A 3-0 win against a dangerous Sri Lankan side is a proud achievement for the whole team!," the New Zealander wrote. "But it was a series filled with so many more highlights and achievements than just the wins.

"Stand out performances from our youngest squad members, a bowling group that fought back in every match, two centuries from key players, a new captain quickly growing into the role, a cornerstone player achieving 100 caps for Pakistan and the whole squad contributed throughout the series which continues to grows our depth for future series.

"These are only some of the achievements that add up to wins and what drives me in my coaching."—Agencies

PAKISTAN'S Babar Azam bats in the nets during a practice session at the Rawalpindi Cricket Stadium on Monday.—Tanveer Shahzad/White Star

Pakistan to continue reliance on all-rounders, says Salman ahead of T20 tri-series

Tournament featuring Zimbabwe, Sri Lanka to be played in double round robin format

By Kashif Abbasi

RAWALPINDI: (From L) Sri Lankan captain Dasun Shanaka and his Zimbabwe and Pakistan counterparts Sikandar Raza and Salman Ali Agha pose with the T20 tri-series trophy on Monday.—Courtesy PCB

RAWALPINDI: Pakistan will stick to their strategy of relying on all-rounders rather than specialists in T20 cricket going into the tri-series — also involving Sri Lanka and Zimbabwe — which starts here on Tuesday.

The opener at the Rawalpindi Cricket Stadium — which will host the entirety of the tournament — will be played between the hosts and Zimbabwe, and Pakistan will look up to their all-rounders to make a difference again.

The strategy, which has emerged as a blueprint of Pakistan's white-ball head coach Mike Hesson since was appointed in May this year, has come under heavy criticism due to its nature of ignoring the importance of specialist batters and bowlers.

Match starts at 6:00pm (PST)

But for Pakistan T20 captain Salman Ali Agha, it is the go-to approach given what he believes is a "luxury" to have good enough all-rounders to deliver with both bat and ball.

"As you may have seen, we try to go for all-rounders mostly, and thankfully we have some who bowl and bat equally well," he said in the pre-series press conference at the venue on Monday. "So we'll try to carry on the same combination for the tri series.

"All of the all-rounders we have can bowl all four overs, and they bat really well too. So why would we not try to utilise them?

"[Both] Mohammad Nawaz and Faheem Ashraf can contribute fully in bowling as well as batting. All top teams are doing that [relying on all-rounders]. We take [having that option] it as an opportunity."

SAMAD LIKELY TO RETURN

Pakistan had named the squad for the tri-series earlier this month and will carry on with the same players, barring batter Hasan Nawaz, who was dropped and asked to play first-class cricket following a series of poor performances.

While there was no replacement announced, Abdul Samad, another batter known for his power-hitting, is being seen as Pakistan's choice for the lower middle-order finishing position.

"In the middle-order, you can say we are not performing the way we would like to," Salman admitted. "Yes, Hasan Nawaz isn't there — I hope he makes a comeback soon — but we have Abdul Samad, so we may give him a go. He bats at number six and can play the finisher's role."

Pakistan are unlikely to experiment further as they look to fine tune their combination with the T20 World Cup set to be held in February-March.

"We'll try to give opportunities to all of the 15 players in the squad, but the priority is to win matches," Salman noted. "In T20 cricket you can't take any team lightly.

"Whichever series we play in the near future, it is for the preparation for the World Cup."

Salman's own form was poor during the Asia Cup, of which Pakistan lost the final against India in September. The Pakistan skipper accumulated a paltry 72 runs across seven matches.

The right-hander, however, bounced back with a century against Sri Lanka in the first match of the ODI series, which concluded with Pakistan completing a 3-0 sweep on Sunday. Salman had earlier also scored a half-century against South Africa.

"I wasn't in the best form during the Asia Cup, neither in a good frame of mind, perhaps," said the 31-year-old. "Failures do really affect you in international cricket. But I've done well in the ODIs and will try to carry that confidence into the T20s as well."

SL DUO SENT BACK HOME

Meanwhile, Sri Lanka suffered a setback ahead of the tri-series as captain Charith Asalanka and fast bowler Asitha Fernando were ruled out due to illness and sent home as a precaution.

Sri Lanka Cricket said both players needed rest and proper medical care to ensure full recovery before future assignments.

Asalanka's absence has led to an immediate change in leadership, with experienced all-rounder Dasun Shanaka appointed captain for the tournament.

Sri Lanka have also added young batter Pavan Rathnayake to their squad as a replacement.

The tri-series format will see each team play four league fixtures before the top two sides qualify for the November 29 final.

All matches are scheduled for a 6:00pm start, with the toss taking place at 5:30pm.

Pakistan squad: Salman Ali Agha (captain), Abdul Samad, Abrar Ahmed, Babar Azam, Faheem Ashraf, Fakhar Zaman, Mohammad Nawaz, Mohammad Wasim Jr, Mohammad Salman Mirza, Naseem Shah, Sahibzada Farhan (wicket-keeper), Saim Ayub, Shaheen Shah Afridi, Usman Khan (wicket-keeper), Usman Tariq.

Fixtures:
Nov 18: Pakistan v Zimbabwe
Nov 20: Sri Lanka v Zimbabwe
Nov 22: Pakistan v Sri Lanka
Nov 23: Pakistan v Zimbabwe
Nov 25: Sri Lanka v Zimbabwe
Nov 27: Pakistan v Sri Lanka
Nov 29: Final

Fearless England ready to shake off weight of failure

LONDON: Recent history will weigh heavily on the shoulders of England's players when they take the field in Perth on Friday seeking to end a lamentable run of Ashes failure in Australia.

They have lost 13 of their previous 15 test matches Down Under, drawing the other two, and you must go all the way back to 2011 for the last England victory.

Confident noises are coming out of England's camp, though, and whether or not Brendon McCullum's side can turn the tide, one thing is for sure, the touring side will not die wondering.

England have resembled lambs to the slaughter in their last three away Ashes series, losing the tactical and psychological battles and having technical frailties ruthlessly exposed.

This time, however, under inspirational captain Ben Stokes they look set to fight fire with fire.

Pace-bowling greats James Anderson and Stuart Broad may have left the stage but England boast six fast bowlers capable of denting the toughest Australian armour, top-order batsmen who can score at dizzying rates and a century-hungry Joe Root freed from the shackles of being captain.

"It's going to be hard. But if they get everything right, I look at this and go, actually, England can definitely win the series without a shadow of a doubt," said Alastair Cook, player-of-the-series when England last won in Australia in 2010-11.

"The way this England side plays, they've got a really good chance."

The fearless front-foot approach that coach McCullum and captain Stokes have ingrained in England has produced 25 wins, 14 defeats and only two draws in 41 tests.

So-called Bazball produced fireworks and acrimony in equal measure two years ago in England when Australia retained the Ashes with a 2-2 draw having won the opening two matches.

At times, Australia were knocked off the rails by England's full-gas approach, but critics accused the hosts of being architects of their own downfall, especially a frenzied day one of the first test when Stokes declared on 393-8 with Root unbeaten on 118 and Australia won the match by two wickets.

With the weapons at his disposal, McCullum is unlikely to tone down his team's cavalier approach, but former England fast bowler Steven Finn reckons Bazball will be used selectively to stop the Australians dictating terms.

"I don't like the term Bazball," Finn, another member of the 2010-11 squad, told Reuters.

"But I think that the manner in which they play is part of the reason why I think they've got their best chance in 15 years of regaining the Ashes Down Under, because in 2010-11 when we went down there and won, we pushed back against Australia.

"When Australia are on top, you need to be able to push back rather than just fall like a pack of cards as happened in the last three series down there.

"There's this Australian media rhetoric about [Bazball] being arrogant. I actually think the Aussie public will respect it as a team playing positively to try and force results."

Stokes is seeking to become only the sixth post-war England captain to win an Ashes series in Australia, and the 34-year-old can be assured a lively reception from the locals in Perth.

"One thing Australia know is if they poke the bear a bit, they know what Stokes can do," Cook said. "I think if there's ever a player in England's history who Australia feared, Stokes is up there."—Reuters

Handscomb, Konstas spearhead PM XI against England

SYDNEY: Experienced campaigners Peter Handscomb and Peter Siddle spearhead a Prime Minister's XI named on Monday to meet England which also features a string of promising youngsters led by Test opener Sam Konstas.

The two-day pink-ball clash from November 29-30 at Manuka Oval in Canberra will be important preparation for Ben Stokes' tourists ahead of the day-night second Test at the Gabba the following week.

It will also be an opportunity for Australia's emerging stars to make a mark with the Test team ageing and regeneration inevitable.

Konstas, 20, will face international opposition for the first time since his Test axing this year as he bids to stay in the frame for a recall during the Ashes series.

Also selected were young prospects Oliver Peake, Hugh Weibgen and Charlie Anderson, who were all part of Australia's U-19 World Cup-winning team last year.

Middle-order batsman Handscomb, who played the last of his 20 Tests on the 2023 India tour, will captain the side with 40-year-old quick Siddle, who played 67 Tests, adding valuable experience.

"We've selected a squad that strikes a balance between youth, experience, and opportunity," said chairman of selectors George Bailey.

"It's a chance to build depth, reward performance, and provide valuable exposure and experience against international competition."

Former Australia captain Tim Paine will coach the team.

PM XI squad: Peter Handscomb (captain), Benji Floros, Campbell Kellaway, Campbell Thompson, Charlie Anderson, Doug Warren, Hugh Weibgen, Joel Curtis, Nathan McSweeney, Oliver Peake, Peter Siddle, Sam Konstas, Samuel Skelly.—AFP

India confront batting blind spot after Kolkata pitch boomerangs

KOLKATA: India have long curated home tracks that accentuate turn, but the assumption their own batters would master such conditions no longer appears safe following their defeat in the opening Test against South Africa.

On a treacherous Eden Gardens' pitch, the ball bounced irregularly and turned sharply and none of the teams posted 200. Touring captain Temba Bavuma's unbeaten 55 was the highest score by any batter.

India, a batter short as skipper Shubman Gill retired hurt in the first innings with a neck injury and did not bat in the second, were bundled out for 93 chasing 124 for victory.

South African spinners claimed 12 of the 18 Indian wickets in the match exposing the home batters' vulnerabilities against the turning ball.

South Africa off-spinner Simon Harmer finished with a match haul of eight wickets to bag the player-of-the-match award.

It was jarring to home fans used to watching nimble-footed and supple-wristed Indian batters dominate spin.

India head coach Gautam Gambhir mounted a spirited defence of the much-maligned pitch on Sunday, shifting the conversation from conditions to competence.

"There were no demons in this wicket," Gambhir told reporters in an assessment of their batting that led to the sobering defeat inside three days.

"It was not an unplayable wicket. It was a wicket where your technique can be judged, your mental toughness can be challenged, and more important than that is your temperament.

"The point is that you should be able to know how to play turn. And this is what we asked for and this is what we got. But when you don't play well, this is what happens.

"I felt that if you are willing to put your head down and if you have a solid defence, if you have the temperament, you can definitely score runs. Yes, it might not be a wicket which is going to [allow you to] be very, very flamboyant, where you can play those big shots.

"But if you are willing to put your head down, definitely it's a wicket where you can score. I still believe that irrespective of how the wicket was, 124 was chaseable."

Opener KL Rahul's 39 in the first innings was the highest score by an Indian batter in the match.

The 44-year-old Gambhir, who has lost nine of his 18 Tests as India head coach, has picked up a reputation for tough-talking and confrontation.

Earlier this year, on the tour of England, he was involved in an angry exchange with Surrey's head groundsman at the Oval after the curator told him to stay at a certain distance while inspecting the pitch.

Meanwhile, winning captain Bavuma, who showed both technique and temperament, had no doubt about the difficulty of the pitch.

"I found it a bit tricky to trust the bounce of the wicket," Bavuma said. "Some balls were bouncing nicely, others were squatting. So that was a bit tricky, which made cross-batted shots a bit harder. I always back my defence and my game is that simple — I just try to play around my defence."

Bavuma did not disagree when asked if he felt South Africa beat India in their own game on a pitch like that.

"Yeah, probably true," he told reporters. "We've come here knowing that the wickets are going to be spinner-friendly, similar to what we got in this game. So it didn't come as a surprise."

South Africa coach Shukri Conrad said he believed both teams were surprised by how the wicket behaved on the first day.

"We thought the wicket would (turn) on day one, but we did not bargain for as much turn and bounce, that threw both sides," he told reporters, adding the victory, South Africa's first in India since 2010, will give the team a huge boost in confidence.

"We won the World Test Championship final earlier in the year but this is right up there for us," he said. "Playing at Eden Gardens and doing something we have not done for 15 years, you can only dream of coming here [and winning].

"The psyche now is that while we might not have the ability that a lot of teams have, or we have not tapped into that ability yet, what we lack in that we have certainly made up for in terms of playing as a unit. The resilience that we showed, we never give up and I am so proud in that group in terms of the belief that we have got."

India have slipped to the fourth place in the World Test Championship standings after the loss and have plenty to ponder ahead of the second and final Test in Guwahati.

Gill was taken to hospital and later discharged, but is doubtful for the Test in Guwahati beginning on November 22.

India played spin-bowling all-rounder Washington Sundar at number three in Kolkata but B Sai Sudharsan is likely to reclaim his top-order place in Guwahati especially if Gill is not available.—Agencies